

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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ELLIE MENZIES OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS, SEIU 1199NW

INTERVIEWEE: ELLIE MENZIES

INTERVIEWER: CINDY COLE

SUBJECTS: SCOTLAND; POSTWAR; SAN DIEGO; QUEBEC; SEATTLE; SHIPBUILDER; PENSIONS; UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON; ANTI-VIETNAM WAR MOVEMENT; FEMINISM; WOMEN'S MOVEMENT; ANTI-RACISM; SEIU 1199NW; FOLK MUSIC; ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE; ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is an interview with Ellie Menzies of the Seattle Labor Chorus for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. The interview is being done in Seattle, Washington on May 5, 2016. Ellie, why don't you just go ahead?

[00:00:24] **ELLIE MENZIES:** Okay. I was born in Greenock, Scotland in 1948. I was a post-war baby, first child of my young parents.

Greenock was bombed during the war by the Germans in their attempt to wipe out the shipyards and the British and American naval fleets that were harbored on the River Clyde. They missed their main targets but left homes and local businesses destroyed by incendiary bombs, setting the town on fire. Unexploded parachute landmines

were still being found when I was young. The remnants of the war were a constant. We couldn't play safely in certain areas and damages were still visible.

There was also the feeling of the world being depressed all around me, sadness that was deep but not articulated. It wasn't clear to me as a child that the war was over and wouldn't be starting again.

The war was affecting us in other ways, in particular with the economy. Allied policies to rebuild Japan and Germany led to modern shipyards being built in Japan. As a result, the Clyde shipbuilding industry in Scotland gradually declined and workers were slowly becoming redundant. It was a great irony after the sacrifices made by so many. Men and war veterans especially who had no work could be seen wandering around with nothing to do. It was a gray world. I didn't fully understand that it would change the course of my life forever.

My father worked in the shipyards. I was very close to my father's family, my grandfather especially. He had an old wind-up record player and we listened to Scottish traditional music, traditional fiddle orchestras and Jimmy Shand with his accordion.

We spent a lot of time in the Scottish countryside, and I was taught Scottish songs to sing in the car. I was always asked to perform by my grandfather at gatherings of family and friends, but I was very shy.

I took Scottish country dancing lessons when I was five, although I wasn't very good at it. We were always practicing the highland fling as kids, and sword dances with fake swords, of course.

My great-grandmother on my father's side was a big fan of the Gaelic mòd, which is a festival of Scottish Gaelic song, arts and culture that continues to this day.

I was very moved by my grandparents' commitment to who I was—being Scottish and the culture and the music—so that when the next thing that happened to our family was that we were uprooted and moved to North America, I was very challenged by that whole experience. But it was enriched by the fact that I'd been privileged enough to have that until I was nine.

We left for Canada in 1957, when I was almost nine, on a ship headed to Quebec City on the St. Lawrence River. My father had a job working there in a shipyard. We were there for two years, and I learned some French and learned a lot about the culture in Quebec and was very excited to be there. But [we] moved again later to another shipyard, a shipbuilding town, San Diego, then from there, four years later, to Seattle, where I still live.

I was influenced strongly by my mother's mother as well, who was a very strong woman. She had lobbied the company that my grandfather had worked for after he died. She was a widow and there were no such things as pensions in those days for women. She went to London and worked with a group of other women, and they all worked together and they won a pension for everybody. She was one of the strongest leaders of that group.

I'm very proud of her for that, and I think that [with] the background that I had, I was very open to the kind of world that I lived in and what the pressures were and the tensions were that made life difficult for so many people and difficult for my own family.

I also was very privileged to be able to go to the University of Washington after high school. I was very opened up to ideas that involved the movements that were against the Vietnam War, the women's movement, the fight against racism at the University and in the country. All these things were new to me because I hadn't lived in this country, and I was learning so much about them and it was very exciting for me. But I was still very new to this country and very shy, so it took me a long time before I felt comfortable becoming engaged in anybody's actual movements. But it was something I wanted to do, and I had an eye for it.

I eventually ended up working for SEIU 1199NW [Northwest] representing healthcare workers, and became an organizer there, which was a great experience for me and I was very happy to do it. One of the things that we would do was we would have action in the field with employers. Even when we had strikes just picketing, we would invite the Seattle Labor Chorus to come to our meetings and to our events. They would come and it was a really wonderfully rich experience to have them come, and very inspirational.

Of course, I feel the connection to all my younger years of being attached to music, just as an individual. I didn't play instruments, I didn't learn how to read music, but I sang a lot. I listened to folk music during the 60s and 70s, and I was very excited about the possibility of being able to sing in a chorus.

But my work was really demanding, there was a lot to be done, and I decided that I couldn't do it until I retired. So, three years ago I decided that it was time for me to retire and I could join the Labor Chorus. Now I'm a tenor and I sing in the Labor Chorus and I'm very happy. It's a great and rich experience, and we encourage anybody else to do it. I think that it's an important part of the labor movement to continue the tradition of singing and having music as part of our struggle to win for working families and people all over the world.

[00:07:27] **CINDY:** Are there other personal reasons that you might be in this chorus, besides what you just said?

[00:07:35] **ELLIE:** Well, it's really easy to join the chorus when you know some people who are already in it. I think that's also true that people I know in the chorus are very committed to the same values that I have—economic justice, environmental issues that are really important right now. The kind of broad reach that our music takes, I think, it includes all kinds of current issues that are really important that in some ways resemble back in the 60s and 70s when I was involved in some of the women's movement issues, especially.

So, I think it's just like home. There's a warmth and a welcome, and I think kind of a family feeling about being part of this chorus. Every time that I think that it's hard, I also remind myself that while I'm learning a new song or being challenged in some way, it's worth it, and we get really good music out of it and people love to hear us. It's a great joy.

[00:08:53] **CINDY:** Good. Thank you, Ellie.